

ACTION ON FOOT OF A FOOD ALERT

Where there is a need for action to be taken or to convey information the FSAI will issue a food alert to enforcement agencies and to food distributors and retailers. The food alert will also be placed on the FSAI's website. The food alert will contain as much information known about the food to assist the agencies in a rapid response. The following is the type of information which would usually be given:

- Nature of the hazard
- name of the product
- name and address of the manufacturer
- use-by date
- batch code
- size of container
- quantities affected
- pictures of the labels and containers
- list of stores which have been supplied.

For Category I Alerts

EHOs keep a database of food businesses in their area and once notified can quickly identify a food business they suspect may have been supplied the alerted food. These businesses will then be contacted to inform them of the alert and ensure the appropriate action is taken to protect public health, this may involve ensuring the product is removed from sale.



For Category II Alerts such as product withdrawal and recalls, the EHOs will ensure in the course of their routine inspections of food businesses that these products have been removed from sale. EHOs have various powers under food legislation to seize, detain, withdraw from the market and destroy foods which do not comply with food legislation and which are unfit for consumption.

RESPONSIBILITY OF THE FOOD BUSINESS OPERATOR

The primary responsibility for the safety and suitability of food for human consumption is borne by the food industry. Every food business operator has a legal responsibility under Regulation (EC) No. 178/2002 to ensure at all stages of production, processing, and distribution within the businesses under their control that foods satisfy the requirements of food law. A food business operator is also legally obliged not to place food on the market if it is unsafe.

A food business operator is also responsible for the establishment of a satisfactory traceability system so that if a food is found to be unsafe it can be quickly located and removed from the food chain. There are two ways a food business can alert the public about products they identify as unfit for consumption;

- Recall: This is the removal of unsafe food from the distribution chain and extends to food sold to consumers and therefore involves communication with consumers through adverts or articles in the local or national press, by notices displayed in food premises and in some cases by radio and television news coverage.
- Withdrawal: This is the removal of an unsafe foodstuff from the distribution chain but does not extend to food sold to the consumer; in other words the food has not reached the supermarkets or stores but may have gone to distribution centres or wholesalers.

The food alert system was created to promote consumer confidence in the safety of the food chain and enables the authorities to respond rapidly to protect consumer safety.

For further information on Food Alerts contact your local Environmental Health Officer or log on to www.fsai.ie

Issued by the HSE Environmental Health Service
January 2009



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhise Sláinte
Health Service Executive



HSE
ENVIRONMENTAL
HEALTH

FOOD ALERTS



There are many systems and controls in place to ensure that the food we eat is safe and is of a high standard. However, there are occasions when food products are identified as being hazardous or harmful and action needs to be taken to protect consumers.

A hazard means that a microbiological, chemical or physical contamination of food has occurred and the condition of the food may result in harm to the consumer. Once a hazardous food has been identified it is necessary to alert the authorities so that the appropriate action can be taken to prevent the food from reaching retail stores and consumers. This is done by a Food Alert Notification System. A food alert means a notification issued by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) to official agencies such as the Health Service Executive and food businesses relating to an identified hazard.

The following are examples of how a food alert may arise:

- Samples of foods from factories and retail stores taken by Environmental Health Officers may show upon testing that the food is unsafe. For instance the food may contain bacteria which could cause consumers to become ill; food may contain a colour agent which is banned due to safety concerns such as cancer or it may contain foreign objects due to a problem in the production plant.



- Investigation of illness by Environmental Health Officers working with Public Health personnel and Laboratories where it is suspected or established that consumption of food was the cause of illness in consumers
- Notification from a manufacturer of a recall of food
- A Notice from the European Commission: The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) is operated by the European Commission. Information on harmful foods is exchanged between EU Member States. In turn the FSAI passes relevant information to EHOs, food laboratories, distributors and retailers.
- The purpose of the food alert system is to ensure that information is shared speedily so that food products identified as being a risk to consumers are quickly controlled or removed from the food chain.

CATEGORISATION OF A FOOD ALERT

When the FSAI receives notification of a hazard in food it assesses the risk and determines how serious the problem is, based on the level of harm it could cause to consumers and the scale of the problem. If it is necessary to issue an Alert it will be categorised as either Category I (for Action) or Category II (for Information)



- **Category I Alert (For Action)** – will be used where there is a risk to consumers and immediate action needs to be taken ensuring the removal from sale at retail premises of the product identified e.g.
 - Elevated levels of patulin in apple juice,
 - high levels of listeria in cheese,
 - suspected melamine in sweets
- **Category II (for Information)** – will be used for passing on information relating to food safety, but no action is required. This would be where the food business have taken their own action by issuing a product withdrawal or recall and the alert is to inform the official agencies of this so that they can ensure on routine checks that no product has reached the consumer e.g.
 - Recall of cooked mussels due to presence of the marine biotoxin AZA.
 - Withdrawal of Black Nylon kitchen utensils due to migration of primary aromatic amines,
 - Unauthorized genetically modified rice.